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Why would anyone vacation anywhere else?

By Geoff Dyer

Posted Sunday, Jan. 16, 2011, at 7:10 AM ET

My experience of road trips in the American southwest, especially Utah, has been pretty consistent: amazing driving and spectacular scenery in the day followed, after dark, by depressing motel accommodation and frequently revolting food. This reached a climax five years ago in Monument Valley—it's on Navajo land so the stodge we were eating could not be washed down with beer—when I told my wife that I couldn't hack it any more, that the magnificent days were completely cancelled out by the food, the lodgings and lack of beer.

"I can't bear it either," she said. We've actually been back to Utah every year s ince, so what happened? Did we relent?

No. We discovered that there are amazing places to stay (where they serve terrific food) and that Utah has a thriving culture of microbreweries. After that, the only remaining doubt was why anyone ever took their holidays anywhere other than Utah—so stunningly and diversely beautiful, the whole state might justifiably have been turned into a giant national park.

Of all the great places to stay, few can be greater than Amangiri, near Lake Powell and the town of Page. It's in that characteristic Aman style of austere, natural brutalism that blends in discreetly with the epically desolate landforms. In this instance, cubist angularity meets semicircle-the-wagons defensiveness so that as many rooms as possible have a private view of the scape. W

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hat is it that needs defending against? Nothing in particular—and everything. The sheer scale—in terms of the time involved as much as anything else—of the geomorphological processes that formed the high desert buttes and mesas induces a feeling of precariousness and vulnerability. These processes—abetted by unbelievable sun, freezing cold, scathing wind, wrecking storms—are still at work.

Back in the 19th century, no one could see the attraction of the awful emptiness of the American south-west. Then, in 1901, art historian John C Van Dyke published The Desert, in which he argued that these arid wastes might be viewed as a new topographic category of the sublime. As if to emphasize this, Amangiri's architecture frequently frames the undreary, constantly changing desert that surrounds it. The entryway, for example, offers a windowless view, like a vast and perfect cinema screen, of the kind of landscape familiar from westerns. We languished in our room, watching it on small screen, i.e., sitting with the window-doors pushed back so the distinction between exterior—sky, land, weather—and interior existed only in terms of view and frame.

We made only one excursion, to the aptly named Secret Canyon. We travelled there in a Hummer that, as we boomed along the highway like Recon Marines or rappers, felt frankly ridiculous. Once we got off-road, however, this overweight puppy really came into its own. A 44-degree outcrop of rock? No problem. Remarkably comfy, too, given terrain that, until recently, basked in the confident belief it would only ever be traversed by foot or paw. The slot canyon h ad been formed by flood water eroding the Navajo sandstone (susceptible, like the people after whom it was named, to the power of strong drink) in such a way as to leave the wavy, curving, flowing imprint of water. Walking through the canyon was like an extreme form of past-life regression where, instead of crawling back into the womb, you travel back into mother earth herself. Its walls grew progressively steeper and more constricted. Soon it was twisting and

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turning like a narrow flame of stone. Thirty feet up there was blue sky. Sunlight bathed the rusty walls into multi-banded tiers of red, all the time writhing back on themselves: a constriction of space all the more intense for being amid a superabundance of space. Gradually, it opened out and we were reborn, reunited with the openness again.

That was the only time we left the compound. You know the way some upscale places in the Mediterranean or Caribbean have their own private beaches? Amangiri has its own private desert. Step outside your room—into the view, as it were—and you can go on two tremendous hikes around the hulking mesas. Two doesn't sound like much but bear in mind the way that the changing light and weather mean that the colors are all the time flaring up, fading, glowing and shifting, and it's unlikely you could ever be sated or bored. Everyone wants to see the Northern Lights but the western lights are hard to beat. I don't think I've ever seen so many colors as on the Hoodoo Trail, at sunrise and sunset. There was sky in every direction and every way you looked it was doing something different: pink and pretty one way, pandemonium in another, a dark slab of cloud overhead, and a blue haze everywhere else.

Incredibly, the moon—last seen the night before in the east—was only now coming to the end of its shift, emerging from a bank of clouds, sinking like a silver sun in the west while the real sun was clearing the mountains in the east.

There's a slightly carceral quality to the sheer walls of Amangiri, as if it might, in some globally scorched future, be the world's most luxurious prison. So luxurious that any kind of parole feels like an added increment of punishment. We realized, as we set out on the rest of our road trip, that we had done things in precisely the wrong order, that this is where you should end up, after sampling Utah's other splendors.

We dipped into Arizona and zoomed through Monument Valley. Having stayed there on two previous occasions, we were

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keen to get north, on to Canyonlands and the Arches. (How quickly one becomes used to things, however stupendous!)

We had booked a room at the Gonzo Inn in Moab and were delighted in the late twilight, to spot the sign in cool purple neon. Except the sign was the coolest t hing about the Gonzo, which turned out to be no more than a jumped-up motel. But we weren't here to linger in our room. We were here to drink beers from bottles with pleasingly decorative labels: Evolution Ale, Chasing Tail, Polygamy Porter ("Why Have just One?").

And to hike in the Arches, one of the smallest national parks in the United States. You can drive round and see dozens of sandstone arches in a couple of hours but there are wonderful walks too. The best is to Delicate Arch, best seen, we were told, at sunset. The trail is indicated by a few wooden posts and, where terrain is too rocky, by cairns. Somehow we veered from the trail. Finding ourselves on an unmarked angle of sliprock, we could see where we wanted to be but had no idea of how to get there. It was only after a spirit-sapping detour that we rejoined the trail to what looked like a red-orange amphitheater swarming with spectators as though a new-age gladiatorial contest were about to be staged.

The sun was sinking fast by the time we got there. Deep blue sky, blazing red rock, the Delicate Arch framing the snow-tented La Sal mountains in the distance. Unlike books or films, landforms are rarely overrated. Hence all the photographers—so many that one half expected Lady Gaga to emerge from beneath the arch. As it was, anyone who did get near to the arch—me, for example—was allowed to do so only for a few seconds as the photographers had incontestable rights to an image untainted by any hint of the mass of humanity crouched around it like fans at a concert.